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Brave students are a resource for the country: modalities of student participation in Tigray, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Government primary schools in Ethiopia offer an example of resource optimisation for the purpose of improving conditions and learning. Through positions of distributed leadership, students share responsibility for the learning and conduct of their peers. Their elected representatives are involved in school-level decision-making through the Parent Student Teacher Association, and all students participate in *gim gima* (public evaluation sessions) in which they report cases of misconduct amongst staff and students. Drawing on an ethnographic case study of Ketema Primary School, this paper explores these modalities of student participation. In illustrating how a school in a low-income country capitalises on its human resources while providing students with practical experiences of leadership, the paper offers insights on pedagogies for sustainable development.

Keywords

Distributed leadership; Ethiopia; peer learning; student leadership; student participation; student voice; sub-Saharan Africa

1. Introduction

Like many of its neighbours in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), Ethiopia has greatly expanded educational participation in recent years, with primary enrolment growing from three to 18 million since the early 1990s. Education is conceived as a means of national development, part of broader efforts to reduce poverty and elevate Ethiopia to the status of a middle income country by the 2020s (Mitchell 2017a, 113-119). Rapid expansion of the education system has placed a strain on national resources, with some suggesting a ‘quality-quantity trade-off’ (Rolleston 2016; Tassew and Aregawi 2016). To address this challenge, the Government has introduced policies aimed at improving quality, including community participation in school leadership and financing, and national programmes for teacher development and school

improvement (Mitchell 2015, 328-331). Reforms introduced over the past decade as part of the General Education Quality Improvement Package (GEQIP) are being studied for their effect on the equity of learning outcomes (Rose and Tassew 2017). This paper discusses one aspect of the education reform package: the formal delegation of leadership responsibilities to students.

The paper draws on a broader ethnographic case study of the agendas, participation and influence of stakeholders at a single urban government school in Tigray. Fieldwork at ‘Ketema School’ took place over an eight-month period in 2014, and involved participant observation, informant-led interviews, and the collection of institutional documents. The study design is reported elsewhere (Mitchell 2017a, chapt 3), as are findings relating to the participation of parents, teachers and others (Mitchell 2017b, 2017c).

2. Modalities of student participation

Being a student in Ethiopia carries strong expectations of responsibilities to others. This is expressed in signs around the compound, such as: ‘Brave students are a resource for the country.’ In conversation, teachers use the terms ‘students’ and ‘our citizens’ interchangeably, which also reflects the view of students as a national resource. Accordingly, students are treated as an asset of the school and charged with various duties, including maintaining facilities and minor agricultural work. Beyond this, four modalities of student participation involve the formal delegation of leadership responsibilities: at the school level students act as *decision-makers* and *evaluators*, at the class level as *academic leaders* and *behavioural models*.

Decision-makers

Students sit on the Parent Teacher Student Association (PSTA) which engages in management processes, such as monitoring exam results by grade/subject, identifying school development priorities, and making budgetary decisions. Although this body has significant authority, students rarely speak in meetings, and do so only to agree with the Director, or provide evidence to support his wishes. Their presence is largely ‘decorative’ (Hart 1992), providing an air of democratic legitimacy while bolstering the authority of the Director.

Evaluators

All students participate in *gim gima*, a form of public evaluation which combines traditional Tigrayan and Leninist accountability practices. In group sessions, students report classmates who are persistently late, absent or disruptive, and teachers who miss classes, fail to mark work, or use corporal punishment. These sessions are facilitated by two senior teachers, and the minutes are submitted to management as part of the internal supervision system. This serves as a powerful mechanism for *downward accountability*, which is often absent in SSA and other low-income contexts (Adzahlie-Mensah 2014; Harber 2017). During the fieldwork period students reported several cases of teacher misconduct which resulted in management advice or additional action – for example, one male teacher who persistently beat his students was fined and reported to the police. Although student evaluation is common in higher education institutions around the world, it is unusual at primary school level.¹

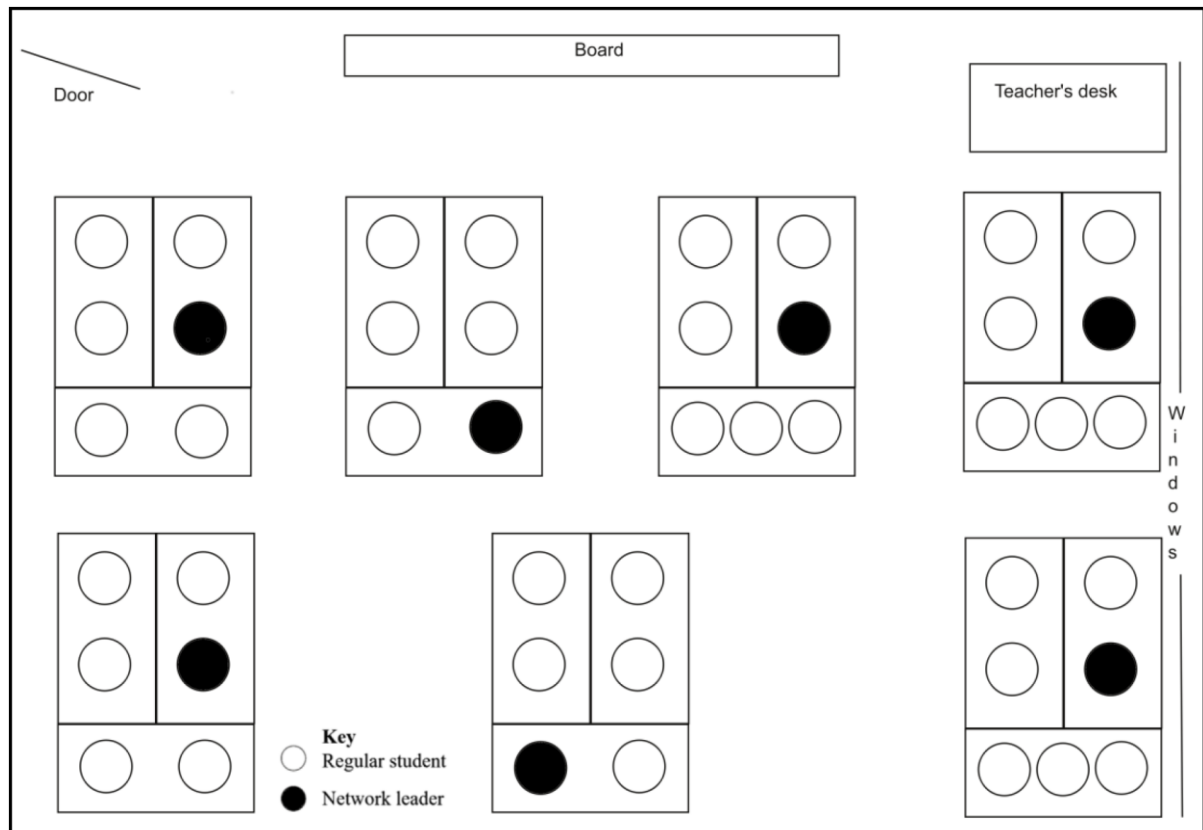
Academic leaders and behavioural models

The main positions of student leadership in the classroom are monitor and network leader. Monitors undertake administrative tasks (e.g. taking attendance, organising club lists) and in the absence of a teacher they maintain working conditions in the classroom. Network leaders are part of the ‘one-to-five’ network system (Weldemariam and Girmay 2015), a recent innovation which draws on the practice of ‘ranking’ students according to their academic performance, which has long been a feature of schooling in Ethiopia and elsewhere in SSA. In the ‘one-to-five’ system, the top-ranking students (‘network leaders’) are distributed around the class, one per desk (see Figure 1). This ensures that all students have at their desks a teacher-appointed academic model. Network leaders serve their peers as:

- *Academic authorities*, explaining tasks and content, sharing work.
- *Group work facilitators*, managing group discussions, encouraging participation.
- *Behavioural models*, modelling appropriate behaviour, regulating peers’ conduct in line with teacher expectations.

¹ A similar practice was recently introduced in Fiji (Crossley et al. 2016, 6).

Figure 1 The organisation of classroom seating around the one-to-five student network system



3. Conclusion

The modalities of participation discussed above place significant responsibilities on students. To a large extent they serve a social control function, bolstering managerial control through ‘disciplinary technologies’ of mutual surveillance and public critique (Foucault [1977] 1995). Although meaningful student involvement in school-level decision-making remains unfulfilled, the structures for student evaluation promote downward accountability to an extent which unusual in SSA and elsewhere.

Student leadership in the classroom facilitates dialogue, cooperation and learning. Rather than a progressive pedagogical reform, these practices are best viewed as a development of existing formalistic pedagogy in a way that is consistent with traditional Tigrayan values and beliefs (Piper 2016; Guthrie 2017).

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